

“Safeguarding the Core and Following Commands”: Party-Army Relations Before the 19th Party Congress

James Mulvenon

In the runup to the 19th Party Congress, scheduled for the fall of 2017, an important phrase appeared in Chinese military propaganda, exhorting the rank and file to “safeguard the core and follow commands” (维护核心、听从指挥). This article dissects the specific features of the propaganda campaign, places them in the context of Xi Jinping’s aspiration to be the “core” of the leadership, and analyzes their implications for party-army relations.

In the fall of 2017, the Chinese Communist Party will hold its 19th Party Congress, electing a new Central Committee, Politburo, and Politburo Standing Committee. Party supremo Xi Jinping, elevated at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, is keenly focused on setting the tone for his second five-year term. On the personnel front, he is using internal party retirement norms to push aside rivals, attempting to replace them with allies in key positions. Xi and his subordinates are also setting the agenda for the Congress through the preparation of key meeting materials, beginning with coordination of central slogans (*tifa*, 提法) through the central propaganda apparatus. As the armed vanguard of the revolution, it is customary for a set of parallel themes to appear in the military propaganda system in the months before key party meetings, usually reflecting the party’s desired political orientation and goals for the PLA. Compared with past *tifa*, however, the current “safeguard the core and follow commands” (维护核心、听从指挥) campaign is unusually personal to Xi’s personal power considerations, and is therefore less indicative of party-military relations than Xi-military relations. This article dissects the specific features of the propaganda campaign, places them in the context of Xi Jinping’s aspiration to be the “core” of the leadership, and analyzes their implications for the military relationship with both the party and Xi as leader.

“Safeguard the Core” (维护核心)

One of the most controversial and contentious issues in Chinese leadership politics is the description of the supremo as the “core” (核心) of the “central party leadership” (党中央). As meticulously analyzed by Alice Miller in her contribution to *China Leadership Monitor* no. 50, the term “core” was historically associated with the past pantheon leaders of the CCP, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.¹ The latter bestowed the title on Jiang Zemin in order to bolster his credibility, but it always felt like a title given rather than a title earned. The pretense was dropped for Hu Jintao, who was described in official party documents as “the Central Committee with Comrade Hu Jintao as general secretary” (以胡锦涛同志为总书记的党中央), underscoring “the collective aspect of the Hu Politburo leadership, with Hu simply as *primus inter pares*.”²

When Miller's article was published in mid-2016, there were sporadic but not authoritative uses of the term "core" at the provincial level to describe Xi Jinping, though only in the context of party discipline.³ Beginning with the closing report of the Sixth Plenum of the 18th Party Congress, however, the state propaganda apparatus began to regularly use the phrase "the Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core" (以习近平同志为核心的党中央), repeating the Jiang Zemin-era formulation that had always eluded Hu Jintao.⁴

Almost immediately, the military media began to "study" the outcome of the 6th Plenum, consistently highlighting Xi Jinping's status as the "core" of the leadership.⁵ This PLA style guidance has continued to spring 2017, though now augmented by the additional exhortation to "safeguard the core" (维护核心). The full phrase ("safeguard the core and follow commands"), which had been used sporadically in other contexts (twice in 2001, twice in May 2016), appeared in the text of Xi Jinping's speech to the 50th anniversary of *Liberation Army Daily* conference in January 2017.⁶ It was elevated to the level of a theme in a patriotic campaign (教育活动) after the Fifth Session of the 12th National People's Congress in mid-March 2017.⁷ It was issued as a formal Central Military Commission "opinion" (意见) on 29 March 2017, entitled "An Opinion on Developing the Normalization and Systemization of the 'Safeguard the Core and Follow Commands' Education Campaign and the 'Two Studies, One Action' Educational Study" (关于开展维护核心、听从指挥主题教育活动和推进“两学一做”学习教育常态化制度化的意见). Since then, the phrase has been a staple in the guidance for the military in the political work preparations for the 19th Party Congress in the fall.

The appearance of this phrase immediately prompts two questions: why "safeguard" (维护)? and why now? The term "safeguard" clearly conveys the impression that the "core" (Xi Jinping) needs to be protected from some form of threat. Since Xi's leadership has not been directly or overtly challenged by any person or group outside of China, it seems reasonable to conclude that the threat must be internal, most likely within the ranks of party and military leaders who have been the target (victim?) of Xi's unprecedented reforms. Among party cadres, opposition to Xi's status as the core may arise from political rivals, but is more likely a consequence of the massive anti-corruption campaign, which has ensnared over 100,000 officials including powerful officials in the state security apparatus. Within the PLA, there are actually two sometimes overlapping disaffected groups: the targets of the PLA's portion of the anti-corruption campaign (4,885 in 2016 alone⁸) and the 300,000 or so active-duty personnel who were RIF'd during the PLA's huge reorganization launched in 2016. Both of these reform campaigns have shattered lucrative "ricebowls" and created potential pockets of animus and resistance among elements of the party system with means, motive, and opportunity to mobilize collective action and armed coercion.

"Follow Commands" (听从指挥)

Perhaps the answers to our questions can be found in the second half of the *tifa*, "follow commands" (听从指挥). On an operational level, the phrase is a logical extension of the themes I explored in issue 51 of the *Monitor* related to the reorganization of the command and control of the PLA and Xi's appointment of himself to be "commander-in-

chief of the CMC Joint Operations Center (军委联指总指挥),” which seemed to suggest a more prominent role for Xi in the actual command and control of Chinese military forces. But I think this is too narrow a reading. Instead, it is more interesting to link the phrase “follow commands” to the broader and persistent call within the propaganda apparatus for the PLA to show absolutely loyalty to the CCP, and increasingly personal loyalty to Xi Jinping as the CMC chairman.

As explored in greater detail in *CLM 47*, the PLA propaganda apparatus in early 2015 appeared to be systematically bolstering the creation of a Mao-like cult of personality centered on Xi. A January 2015 staff commentary in *Liberation Army Daily* was clear about who was in command of the military and whose commands should be obeyed:

they must resolutely protect the authority of the party Central Committee, the CMC, and Chairman Xi [Jinping], as they resolutely heed the command of the party Central Committee, the CMC, and Chairman Xi, and as they accomplish resolutely responding to the call sent out by Chairman Xi, resolutely executing the requirements put forth by Chairman Xi, and resolutely completing the tasks bestowed upon them by Chairman Xi.⁹

This personalization of command theme reached its rhetorical apex in a 22 December 2016 staff commentary in *Liberation Army Daily*, pithily entitled “What is True Loyalty?” (什么是真正的忠诚). In the text, the author distinguishes between “true loyalty” and “pseudo-loyalty” (伪忠诚), ascribing the latter to the “two-facedness” (两面人) of the disgraced Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou. Instead, military personnel who are truly loyal to “the Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as the core” (以习近平同志为核心的党中央) are marked by their “unwavering” propensity to “firmly follow the commands of the Party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission and the Chairman [Xi Jinping] (坚决听从党中央、中央军委和习主席指挥). The subsequent 19th Party Congress campaign to “follow commands” (听从指挥) is simply the operationalization of this guidance.

Conclusion and Implications

The “safeguard the core and follow commands” campaign is a transparent effort by Xi and his allies to stabilize the support of the PLA for his leadership in the months leading up to the 19th Party Congress. The campaign goes out of its way to emphasize the enormity of the challenges that Xi faces in his many reforms, and the military media have even romanticized the situation by proclaiming that “the ship is heavy and helmed by one man” (船重千钧，掌舵一人).¹⁰ Ultimately, the propaganda apparatus is trying to convince the public (and the party?) that having Xi as the core of the leadership is in “the fundamental interest of the party and the people, is critical to the party’s central authority, is a major issue for party unity, and is a major event in the long-term development of the party and state affairs” (是关系党和人民根本利益的大事，是关系党中央权威、关系全党团结和集中统一的大事，是关系党和国家事业长远发展的大事).¹¹ Yet again, however, one must ask whether the campaign reflects real or potential threats to Xi’s position as leader or whether he “doth protest too much.” Is he operating from real intelligence data about resistance and mobilization, or is he driven by insecurity and fear? If the latter, then he is

in many ways simply a manifestation of the party system as a whole, which is too often characterized by a curious combination of bravado and defensiveness. Indeed, the greatest threat to party rule or Xi's position may in fact be the possibility of an overreaction to perceived threats, which ends up creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Notes

¹ Alice Miller, "'Core' Leaders, 'Authoritative Persons,' and Reform Pushback," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 50, accessed at:

<http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm50am.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ The first hints that Xi was going to be treated differently than Hu was the revival of the so-called "CMC Chairman Responsibility System," analyzed in depth in my *China Leadership Monitor* no. 47 piece, "The Yuan Stops Here: Xi Jinping and the "CMC Chairman Responsibility System," accessed at

<http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm47jm.pdf>. The term continues to appear in authoritative PLA media, as seen in a 31 March 2017 staff commentary in *Liberation Army Daily* entitled "Firmly Grasp the Maintenance of the Core, Listen to the Fundamental Political Requirements of Command" (牢牢把握维护核心、听从指挥这个根本政治要求), accessed at: http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-03/31/content_173846.htm.

⁴ http://jz.chinamil.com.cn/n2014/tp/content_7329298.htm.

⁵ http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2016-10/28/content_7329624.htm

⁶ http://www.81.cn/jsjz/2017-02/16/content_7487313.htm

⁷ http://www.81.cn/sydbt/2017-03/17/content_7530551.htm

⁸ "PLA Daily Vows Strict Discipline for Chinese Army," Xinhua, 27 March 2017.

⁹ Staff Commentator, "The work system must be made stricter and more realistic—Discussion Three on Putting great efforts into strengthening the building of the various levels of Party Committee Leading Groups," *Liberation Army Daily*, 28 January 2015, p.1.

¹⁰ http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-03/31/content_173846.htm

¹¹ Ibid.